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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an advanced English course at a Mexican university entitled, "Short Science Fiction Stories in English." The course is based on an ecological, co-emergent approach in which the various components of curriculum action are understood to exist in a dynamic and mutually specifying relationship. With this conceptual approach, the course provides enriching transcultural encounters. The paper describes the theoretical-methodological framework of the course, its objectives, the choice of the short story, the syllabus, class management, and evaluation policy. Science fiction provides university students with a vision of the impact that science and technology project on society from the Anglophone point of view, offering spaces for critical transcultural encounters. The course's three objectives include stimulating appreciation and enjoyment of literature in English, offering a critical analysis of the manifestations of Anglophone cultures as they are revealed in science fiction, and promoting the improvement and diversification of English knowledge and competence. Students complete 24 stories and 2 essays on science fiction, meeting twice weekly for 2 hours. They read and discuss in groups and complete portfolios. Some students prepare film scripts or write original science fiction stories. A course syllabus is appended. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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TEACHING SHORT SCIENCE FICTION STORIES IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN MEXICO

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The advanced English course at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa in Mexico City, "Short Science Fiction Stories in English," is based on an ecological, "co-emergent" approach in which "the various components of curriculum action (e.g. students, teachers, texts and processes) are understood to exist in a dynamic and mutually specifying relationship" (Davis, et al 1996:151). This perspective is congruent with the teaching proposals for "transactional" literary reading of Judith Langer of the Center on English Learning and Achievement at the State University of New York at Albany. With this conceptual framework, the course has provided enriching, transcultural encounters, both for the professor as well as the students. I will briefly report on: the theoretical-methodological framework of the course, its objectives, the choice of the short short story, the syllabus, class management, and evaluation policy.

Background

In an earlier article (Lee Zoreda 1992) I have described the justification for the creation and implementation of a series of courses on science fiction within the English program at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico City. In the initial phase--since the 1980s, these courses were almost the only places for the analysis and critical appreciation of Anglophone cultures within a "vocational" curriculum of reading comprehension. During the last few years the English program has been expanded to include fluency in the language (Flores, et al 1997) through twelve levels from beginners to advanced students. The courses of science fiction as well as film courses form part of the advanced levels---"integration courses". These courses have had their basic objective to foment in the students critical encounters with Anglophone cultures. It should be pointed out that the language courses at this university do not carry credits, even though there is a graduation requirement of reading comprehension in at least one foreign language.[1]

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[1] In 2003, one undergraduate major will give credits for at least three language courses---English or French. Hopefully the other bachelor degree programs will follow suit.

The three first courses of science fiction in English were structured according to a trimester system using specific themes of this genre, each one demanding the reading of two stories, from ten to 30 pages each. In addition, it was required to read several essays (in Spanish and English) on science fiction in general or on a particular author, and to turn in essays on selected themes at the end of the courses.

Although these courses were well received, especially by science and engineering students, as each trimester advanced, drop outs occurred, and there were problems trying to cover the program. In fact, the number of readings was not realistic even for the most sci-fi fans among the students. In spite of this, I was convinced of the importance of science fiction as an ideal means for students to approach critically Anglophone cultures. But the problem was how to offer courses in science fiction in English that, given the curricular policy, would be realistic in terms of homework, have a critical outlook, and be more dynamic.

Theoretical Framework for Change

Although I like to think of myself as a "cutting edge" professor of English as a Foreign Language, after a serious reflection about how the above courses were taught, I realized that I was following a similar pattern to the literature courses I took as a university student of Spanish---thirty years ago! That is, all the short stories and essays were assigned as homework, and the two weekly sessions were dedicated to resolving linguistic problems and discussing content. Unfortunately, only about half of the students would come to class having prepared the readings.

On commenting with a colleague about my disappointment with the above courses, he suggested to have the students read the stories *during* the sessions.[2] Immediately I knew that this would be the ideal solution in that the courses would be less teacher-oriented, more lively and with a collaborative spirit among all the participants.

This turn from a traditionally oriented approach to a more participative one is reflected in recent research on the "co-emergent" curriculum and the pedagogical

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[2] I am grateful to Dr. Javier Vivaldo for his comments.

proposals of the National Research Center on English learning and Achievement at the State University of New York in Albany, both of which were familiar to me (long live a rather late coming link between theory and practice!). The educational perspective of "co-emergence" is defined as "the various components of curriculum action (e.g.. students, teachers, texts and processes) ... `[being] understood to exist in a dynamic and mutually specifying relationship" (Davis, et al 1996:151). This "enactivist" focus conceptualizes the teaching-learning process as one which leads students and teachers to the creation of both themselves and their environment (Davis et al 1996: 157). These authors state that

> knowledge...is neither uncovered nor invented, but emerges in---that is, it is *enacted* through---the history of our participation in a dynamic and responsive world....In this sense, knowledge is like the subject-matter of conversation: its nature and its structure can never be anticipated, let alone fixed....The co-emergent curriculum, then is not something which needs to be invented, created or pre-determined. Nor is it the result of particular methods, texts, or activities.... [It] emerges from an understanding of human existence and cognition...as processes of *natural drift* in which human subjects co-emerge with the environments which contain them. (Davis et al 1996: 166-167)

This ecological vision of education as a network of dynamic, complex and interdependent systems (Zoreda-Lozano y Lee Zoreda 1996) is also found in the work of Judith Langer at the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement on the teaching of literature to native speakers of English. Langer takes as her starting point the concept of Louise Rosenblatt about the "transactional"[3] nature of reading literature: the text, the reader, and his or her interpretation (in the words of Rosenblatt, the "poem") are in interdependent, reciprocal relations, and the important thing in the literature class is for the students to respond personally (aesthetically) to the text *before* analyzing it (Rosenblatt 1978 y 1995). With this theoretical framework, Langer has explored the phenomenological and hermeneutical

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[3] Rosenblatt bases her idea on John Dewey's notion of experience as a "transaction" of the organism with its environment (Dewey 1938: 42). Dewey frequently used interchangeably "interaction" and "transaction."

nature of reading literature with native speakers of English from primary to high school. She maintains that during reading, the reader is constantly involved in the creation and re-creation of temporary imagined worlds---"envisionments" (Langer 1989: 2). She describes the act of reading as an experience of growing understandings that evolve through time; the reader develops an "internal" text that is continually transformed in relation to the "external" text. Meaning resides in the reader; nevertheless, readers follow conventions determined by textual linguistical characteristics. Thus, texts function semiotically; a social relationship is established between the text and the reader (Langer 1989: 3). Reading is a meaning-making act, of transformation; it is the act of building an "envisionment." Langer contends that a process pedagogy would give the reader a wide array of options of meaning-making in the development of literary comprehension. Also, teachers, through the questions they ask students, can provide language and thought supports which would aid students in getting the momentary information that they seek while these very supports would serve as models of *strategies for meaning-making* (Langer 1989: 20).

Langer criticizes what has been the traditional "efferent" literature class (seeking information in the text instead of experiencing the text aesthetically): frequently the class begins with a review of what the text "says", using plot summaries and quizzes that point toward the text's "meaning" through questions selected by the teacher that lead the students to predetermined interpretations. To a large extent, this pedagogy grew out of the belief in a hierarchy of questions that go from the most literal to the most abstract. On the contrary, the transactional methodology that she proposes, still recognizing how difficult it is to change years of teaching habits, is oriented to learn and listen to the ideas of the students and to conduct the lesson according to the students' literary responses. Therefore, in the literature class our

> primary concern is helping students arrive at their own responses, explore horizons of possibilities, and move beyond initial understandings to more thoughtful interpretations. (Langer 1995: 87)

Some strategies (which should not be understood as a linear teaching model) which she recommends are: 1) facilitate access to the personal experience of reading;

2) promote initial understandings; 3) support the development of interpretations; 4) promote critical perspectives; and 5) carry out a "stocktaking" of ideas and interpretations in class with the belief that a lesson or a reading never is totally finished; it is always open to subsequent understandings (Langer 1995: 88-93).

As the support for the transactional approach , Langer proposes certain teaching guidelines for literature:

1. Use the classroom as a place for exploration where students develop possibilities and understandings instead of retelling meanings already acquired (those that they remember) with the teaching adding what is "missing" from those meanings.
2. Put the students' varied understandings in the center of the classwork, in their writing assignments and the discussions. Always start with their initial impressions. This will validate their attempts to comprehend and will be the most productive starting point to construct and refine meanings.
3. The instruction---the help that will stimulate the learners beyond their initial impressions---implies that the teacher functions as a scaffold for their ideas, guiding them through various ways to listen to each other while discussing and thinking. Teachers ought to be listeners, answerers, and assistants, and not information-bearers.
4. Foster ambiguous thinking, hunches, and conjectures instead of absolutes. This is part of the process of understanding literature. Whenever possible, shape questions that arise out of the student's knowledge. Accompany the students in what they are telling instead of following the teacher's own agenda.
5. Support the students in the development of their own well-thought out interpretations, and to appreciate those of their classmates. There is more than one interpretation for any given text.
6. Never forget that questioning, searching, and deciding about the space permitted for possible future interpretations is the heart of critical thinking in literature. Teachers as well as students ought to be open to possible meanings; in literary experiences, preconceived goals and absolute interpretations do not exist.
7. Promote learning by providing supports that serve as a guide to the students for

thinking, listening, and expressing oneself; stimulate them to more mature literary discussions by eliciting their own responses and clarifying those responses. Invite them to participate and guide them in sustaining discussions. In other words, support the learners to ponder more deeply their experiences by: paying attention to their thoughts; giving form to the observations that they wish to express; connect their ideas with what has been discussed, read, or experienced; and help them to think about their ideas in more complex ways (Langer 1994: 6-7).

It is evident the commonalities that the "co-emergent" curriculum and Langer's proposal have with the concepts of Vygotsky, the whole language approach, and collaborative learning (Goodman and Goodman 1990). Within an atmosphere of mutual support, the class "performs" literary readings phenomenologically in processes of meaning-making at personal and social levels. Within this perspective it is of utmost importance that the content of the course be meaningful for the learners. In this aspect science fiction is an ideal genre for university students as it provides its vision of the impact that science and technology project on our societies from the Anglophone point of view. Thus it offers spaces for critical---not trivial---transcultural encounters. This springs from the aesthetic nuance of such encounters that provide us with consummatory, integrated, illuminative experiences:

> In art as an experience, actuality and possibility or ideality, the new and the old, objective material and personal response, the individual and the universal, surface and depth, sense and meaning, are integrated in an experience in which they are all transfigured from the significance that belongs to them when isolated in reflection. (Dewey 1958: 297)

Course Objectives

This course has three primary objectives that are interdependent due to the fact that language and culture are interdependent (Kramsch 1993: 3). First, it proposes to stimulate the appreciation and enjoyment of literature in English, specially the science fiction genre---the aesthetic reflection on the social consequences of science and

technology. Second, it offers the critical analysis of the manifestations of Anglophone cultures as they are revealed in science fiction. And, finally, as an advanced course in the language, it promotes the improvement and diversification of knowledge and competence of the English language. Not least of all, it also offers the students a new methodology and ambience for discussing literature.

Methodology

Zavala has commented that the conventional short story varies between 2,000 and 30,000 words, and then delineates three divisions in the subgenre of the story: the short short story (1,000-2,000 words); the very short short story (200-1,000 words); and the super short story (1-200 words) (1996: 166-171). For this course only three stories fit the definition of super short; the majority are characterized as very short, and two are "short". The subgenre of the short short story is ideal to be used in a course where the readings are done in class.

The writers from the so-called "Golden Age" of science fiction---Bradbury, Asimov, Bloch, Knight, Finney, Brown, Clarke, and Russell predominate in the syllabus, mainly because of the clarity in their language and style. However, some more difficult, contemporary authors are included, such as Dick and Malzberg, for their themes and literary power (and also to satisify the taste of the students, especially regarding Dick).

In total, there are twenty-four stories and two essays on science fiction in the program (see Appendix). The class meets twice a week in two hour sessions. Since almost all the activities are developed and ended *during* each session, the participants are informed about punctuality and attendance. Moreover, in the first session the students become aware of the theoretical bases for the course and the kinds of activites that they will be doing, such as the following (without being exhaustive):

- reading aloud;
- developing initial reactions;
- asking questions as we read;
- rethinking initial reactions;
- considering various points of view;

- relating the story to other cultural texts;
- reflecting on alternative interpretations;
- relating the story to one's own life;
- reflecting on the cultural/scientific aspects of the story.

Frequently the students form groups of three or four, and after the reading share with other groups their "meanings-in-movement" (Langer 1994: 9), starting with the title. Thus, classmates suport each other in starting and developing their understandings, having the teacher as a scaffold to guide them to listen to each other and talk among themselves, as they think of their "meanings in-evolution." Instead of being a distributor of information, the teacher must serve as a listener, facilitator, and "midwife". In this kind of "transactional" classroom, questions are asked which the teacher does not know the answers ahead of time. Meanings "emerge" in the interstices between the individual student, his or her classmates, the text, and the teacher. Or as Langer describes this phenomenon:

> ...in envisionment-building classes, [knowledge] is organic, growing from the students' interactions with and explorations of literary works. (Langer 1995: 119)

To be coherent with a co-emergent methodology, this course is assessed using portfolios of work done in class, outside class, alone or in groups. Some possible activities are:

- collecting new words and expressions that the student has learned in a story;
- any of the previously mentioned activities done in class (alone, in pairs or groups);
- drawing to illustrate a story or the point of view of the student;
- reflections on a story.

Occasionally, a student will prepare a film script inspired by a story, or even, be creative and write an original sci-fi story. At the beginning of the course the idea of a portfolio is difficult for students to grasp, since the majority come from a very traditional educational system. But at the end of the term, it gives them quite a lot of satisfaction to have and observe the tangible evidence that has happened during the course, and to change the usual dynamics of anxiety attacks over a final exam. With portfolio assessment, the

student knows from the first day that the result of the course is his or her responsiblity.

Without a doubt, a co-emergent, transactional pedagogy may seem overwhelming to a teacher in giving him or her the responsibility to "orchestrate" the classroom like a jazz group. Nevertheless, it is gratifying to observe how more linguistically gifted students help others. And, furthermore, the multiperspectivity of the group helps to foster critical outlooks, with the students developing from subjective knowers to reasoned, analytical knowers, and finally becoming "constructed" knowers, as they integrate their own knowledge with that of others (Kinsella 1997: 95). The selaction of short short science fiction stories in English as a Foreign Language can propitiate the right kind of learning environment in order to experience the power of literature to transform ourselves:

> Literature makes us better thinkers. It moves us to see the multisidedness of situations and therefore expands the breadth of our own visions, moving us toward dreams and solutions we might not otherwise have imagined. It affects how we go about learning in academic situations, how we solve problems at work and at home. And it moves us to consider our interconnectedness with others and the intrinsic pluralism of meaning; it helps us become more human. (Langer 1995: 145)

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Appendix

SHORT SHORT SCIENCE FICTION IN ENGLISH

OBJECTIVES:

- appreciate and ***enjoy*** literature in English, especially the science fiction genre, which is a literary-aesthetic reflection on the impact of science and technology upon society;
- analyze critically manifestations of Anglophone culture through its sci-fi literature;
- perfect and diversify your knowledge and competence of the English language.

METHODOLOGY:

- The genre of the short short story was chosen because the readings can be done in class. Some stories are longer than 3 pages, but they do not exceed 6 pages.
- The majority of activities will be in-class; therefore, there is a **3 absence limit** for the course.
- Based on the affirmation of Vygotsky that learning is both a collective (inter-mental) and individual (intra-mental) process and which has been applied to the teaching of literature by the Center on English Learning and Achievement at the State University of New York at Albany, some of the activities we will be doing are:

    - reading aloud;
    - developing initial reactions;
    - asking questions as we read;
    - rethinking initial reactions;
    - considering various points of view;
    - relating the story to other cultural texts;
    - reflecting on alternative interpretations;
    - relating the story to your own life;
    - reflecting on the cultural/scientific aspects of the story.

GRADING POLICY:

Each student will be graded at the end of the course through **portfolio assessment** (*evaluación por expediente*). **This is a folder that you keep of work that you do in class, alone or in group, or any extra work you do outside of class**. For example:

- a page with new words/expressions that you learned from a story;
- any short writing activities we do in class, whether alone or in a group;
- any drawings you might make to illustrate a story;
- any reflections outside of class on a story, etc.

- **EACH PORTFOLIO ENTRY SHOULD STATE YOUR NAME, THE STORY, AND THE DATE AT THE TOP OF THE PAGE.**
- **WRITE LEGIBLY.**
- **YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR PORTFOLIO. ALWAYS BRING IT TO CLASS.**

Bring a dictionary to class, although we will try to use it as little as possible.

PROGRAM

Session 1

Wymer, Thomas, et al. "An Introduction to Science Fiction." *The Elements of Fiction in Science Fiction*. Bowling Green, OH: The Popular Press, 1978:4-19.

Evans, Arthur & Ron Miller. "Jules Verne, Misunderstood Visionary." *Scientific American* 276 (4), April 1997:76-81.

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Session 2

Bradbury, Ray. ""August 1999: The Summer Night." *The Martian Chronicles*. New York: Bantam, 1982 [1950].

Asimov, Isaac. "The Fun They Had." Isaac Asimov & Croff Conklin (eds), *Fifty Short Science Fiction Tales*. New York: Collier Books, 1963 [1951].

Session 3

Bloch, Alan. "Men Are Different." Asimov & Conklin (eds). [1954].

Dick, Philip K. "The Alien Mind." *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick: The Eye of the Sibyl (Vol. 5)*. New York: Carol Pub. Group, 1992 [1981].

Session 4

Malzberg, Barry. "Understanding Entropy." Pamela Sargent (ed), *Nebula Awards 30*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1996.

Session 5

Asimov, Isaac. "Dreamworld." Anthony Boucher (ed), *The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction*. New York: Ace, 1956.

Knight, Damon. "Not with a Bang." Asimov & Conklin (eds). [1950].

Session 6

Hilton-Young, W. "The Choice." Asimov & Conklin (eds). [1963].

Finney, Jack. "The Third Level." Asimov & Conklin (eds). [1952].

Session 7

Brown, Fredric. "The Weapon." Asimov & Conklin (eds). [1951].

Porges, Arthur. "The Fly." Asimov & Conklin (eds). [1952].

Session 8

Clarke, Arthur. "Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Orbiting..." *Tales of Ten Worlds*. New York, Signet, 1987 [1959].

Davidson, Avram. "The Certificate." Isaac Asimov, et al (eds), *Invasions: Isaac Asimov's Magical Worlds of Science Fiction*. Roc (Penguin), 1990 [1959].

Session 9

Fox, Paula. "News from the World." Irving Howe & Iliana Howe (eds), *Short Shorts*. New York: Bantam, 1983.

Russell, Eric Frank. "Appointment at Noon." Asimov & Conklin (eds). [1954].

Session 10

Clarke, Arthur. "Who's There?" *Tales of Ten Worlds*. [1958].

Pohl, Frederick. "The Deadly Mission of Phineas Snodgrass." Peter Hanning, ed., *Time*

Travelers. Fiction in the Fourth Dimension. New York, Barnes & Noble, 1998.

Session 11

Asimov, Isaac. "Segregationist." *Robot Visions*. New York: ROC (Penguin), 1991 [1967].

Asimov, Isaac. "The Instability." *Time Travelers. Fiction in the Fourth Dimension*.

Session 12

Clarke, Arthur. "Dog Star." *Tales of Ten Worlds*. [1962].

Session 13

Bradbury, Ray. "Time Intervening." *Time Travelers. Fiction in the Fourth Dimension*.

Ballard, J.G. "The Greatest Television Show on Earth." *Time Travelers. Fiction in the Fourth Dimension*.

Session 14

Clarke, Arthur. "The Nine Billion Names of God." Robert Silverberg (ed), *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*. New York: Avon, 1971 [1953].

Sessions 15-16 Presentation of portfolios